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ABSTRACT

The Lancastrian Monitorial System of Instruction was devised in the late eighteenth century by a teacher in England, Joseph Lancaster, who found it necessary to keep educational costs down in order to continue teaching poor people in the area. This system was organized so that one master teacher could instruct from 200 to 1,000 pupils at one time. The pupils would be divided into groups of ten taught by a monitor who was responsible for issuing books and slates to pupils. As they learned the lessons appropriate for their group, students were promoted to the next group. The system taught four curricular areas--reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic. Memorization of learning was the teaching method emphasized. The system, which spread rapidly in the United States, helped to foster the normal school approach later adopted in the United States. (CB)

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THE LANCASTRIAN MONITORIAL SYSTEM OF INSTRUCTION

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THE LANCASTRIAN MONITORIAL SYSTEM OF INSTRUCTION

Many individuals and groups have contributed much toward making the public school system of the United States. The purpose of this paper was to examine the origin and accomplishments of the Lancastrian Monitorial System. A further purpose was to show the influence of this system on American public education.

Having had a desire early in life to become a teacher, Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838) left home in England without the knowledge of his parents to teach poor people in Jamaica to read the Bible. In walking toward the English port city of Bristol, young Lancaster's money was soon spent. A stranger shared his food with Joseph Lancaster for the duration of this walk.

Serving on a ship as a volunteer worker in traveling to Jamaica, young Lancaster was ridiculed by members of the crew until he preached a sermon concerning swearing and drinking. Sailors on board ship were guilty of these sins. When the sermon had been completed, Joseph Lancaster was respected during the rest of the voyage.

A friend of the parents of Joseph Lancaster furnished money for his return back to England. Here, young Lancaster noticed the educational needs of poor people. At the age of twenty, he used a room in his father's house in teaching children who came from poor families. Lancaster educated these children free or charged them small fees. With many children attending his school, Joseph Lancaster found it necessary to keep costs down, thus discovering the monitorial system of instruction even though the monitorial system of instruction had been used prior to this time.

A Brief History of the Monitorial System

Family life has usually been dependent upon older children helping and teaching younger children. This same principle has been used by educators in past times. John Sturm in his German gymnasium during the sixteenth century had one pupil help ten other pupils in their lessons. During the seventeenth century the Cathedral Church of Rheims, France had a system of instruction by which an entire school could be taught by one teacher. Other countries of Western Europe also adopted similar methods of mass teaching of pupils. A Reverend John Barnard of Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1686 in an autobiography wrote that at the age of six he taught children both older and younger than himself.

An early record of considerable length concerning the monitorial system of instruction was written about Dr. Andrew Bell of England. Dr. Bell became superintendent of the Military Male Orphan Asylum of Madras, India. He was displeased with pupil progress in this school since each child would receive instruction in one lesson each day. Sometimes a child would receive instruction in one lesson every two or three days, and yet one teacher and two ushers taught less than twenty boys.

Dr. Andrew Bell one morning passed by a Malabar School near Madras, India. Here children were sitting on the ground being taught how to write in the sand. Dr. Bell returned to the Orphanage and trained a boy to teach the letters of the alphabet to other pupils by writing them in the sand. The experiment was successful, and more boys were trained as monitors to teach an increased number of boys who entered the orphanage. Dr. Bell was pleased with the progress the pupils were making under monitorial instruction. Dr. Andrew Bell upon his return to England in 1797 published his experiment with the monitorial system.

Joseph Lancaster started a school for poor children in London, England in 1798. The classes were conducted in his parent's home. Since fees paid by parents for educating their children were small or nonexistent, pupil enrollment increased rapidly. To keep the costs of education down, Lancaster thought of a plan whereby monitors could teach other children. He thought of this plan one year after Dr. Andrew Bell had published his experiment. Rivalry developed between the followers of Lancaster and the followers of Bell as to who should receive credit for originating the monitorial system of instruction. Joseph Lancaster was a Quaker while Andrew Bell belonged to the Church of England which helped to increase the feelings of rivalry between their followers. Lancaster and Bell, however, seemingly had friendly visits and corresponded with each other.

The Free School Society was organized in New York in 1805 for educating poor children. A year later The Free School Society based its methods of teaching upon the Lancastrian monitorial system. The New York legislature in 1807 voted to give aid to the Free School Society since the Lancastrian system of instruction was considered to be a good way of providing education for children. Four thousand dollars was voted by the New York legislature to be given for purposes of providing for appropriate buildings and for the instruction of poor children; further aid was to be given in future years also.

The Lancastrian monitorial system spread rapidly to various parts of the United States. The office of State

Superintendent of Public Instruction for Lancastrian schools was set up in Maryland in 1826; this office was discontinued after a two-year period. A state system of the Lancastrian monitorial system was considered by the North Carolina legislature in 1832, but it was never adopted. In 1829 Mexico organized Lancastrian schools for Texas.

When Joseph Lancaster came to the United States in 1818, he was praised by many individuals. According to De Witt Clinton, former governor of New York and president of the Free School Society for twenty-one years, boys learned to read better and a better quality of discipline existed under the Lancastrian plan of instruction compared to other methods of instruction that had been used previously. Governor Wolcott of Connecticut praised the Lancastrian system of instruction for being efficient and economic.

Organization for Instruction

The Lancastrian Monitorial System was organized so that one master teacher could instruct at one time from 200 to 1,000 pupils. These pupils would be divided into groups--ten pupils would usually be in one group taught by a monitor. The monitors would be taught by the master teacher. Each group of ten pupils would often be taught from charts hung on the walls in the school building. In front of each chart usually would be a semi-circle. The pupils making up one group would need to place their toes on the semi-circle while being taught the contents of these charts by monitors. With many small groups of pupils taught by many monitors, it was necessary for these pupils to proceed in military style in marching from their benches to the charts and back to their benches again. The monitor had considerable power in working with pupils. He would attempt to discover reasons for pupil absences, examine pupil achievement and promote to more advanced classes those pupils that could benefit from more difficult learnings. The monitor would be in charge of issuing books and slates to pupils.

Giving of rewards to pupils who were promoted to the next higher class was common. Pupils who received a prize were permitted to show their rewards to other pupils as the former paraded in the classroom. Pupils were placed into a group where the achievement levels of pupils in a given subject matter area were similar.

Joseph Lancaster did not believe in the use of corporal punishment in disciplining pupils; embarrassing children for their misdeeds was considered to be more appropriate. A child who was a discipline problem could be placed in a basket which was hung from the ceiling of the large

classroom, or he could be tied up in a blanket and left in the school during the night. A group of pupils who had misbehaved in school might have a log fastened around their necks; these pupils would be required to parade in the classroom. Cleanliness on the part of pupils was advocated by the monitors and the master teacher. A child who often came to school with an unwashed face could have his face washed by another pupil in front of the entire school.

Joseph Lancaster wrote a book entitled Manuals of Instruction which contained specific ideas and directions in operating his type of monitoral school. A reasonably intelligent person could learn to become a master teacher in a monitorial school by following directions contained in the Manual.

The Lancastrian schools were highly organized so that pupils were constantly pursuing lesson assignments and requirements presented by their respective monitors. There was a proper place for everything in the school, even the caps of pupils were to be hung over their backs.

Curriculum

Joseph Lancaster believed that children should receive instruction from the Bible on a nonsectarian basis while Andrew Bell believed that children should receive religious instruction which was in harmony with the doctrines of the Church of England. After the American Revolutionary War, few Americans were sympathetic toward the Church of England. This was a major reason why the monitorial system of instruction devised by Joseph Lancaster was received with much favor in the United States rather than that of Andrew Bell. Lancaster, as was previously mentioned, was a Quaker while Bell was a member of the Church of England. The two types of monitorial instruction advocated by Lancaster and Bell were quite similar except in the area of religious instruction.

There were eight different levels of reading instruction in the Lancastrian monitorial school. When a pupil had finished satisfactorily one of these levels, he could be promoted to the next higher level regardless of the achievement of other pupils in his specific group. Reading instruction was given on a logical basis. In Class One, pupils would memorize the letters of the alphabet until these letters were known perfectly. In Class Two, children would study syllables made up of two letters while pupils in Class Three would study words and syllables comprised of three letters. Class Four studied words and syllables of four letters while Class Five mastered words of five and six

letters. Pupils in Class Six read from the Old Testament or from the New Testament while Class Seven read selections from the entire Bible. Students in Class Eight would read from other reading sources considered to be of a more advanced level which would aid the pupil in developing his mind.

Children would learn to write and spell by writing the letters of the alphabet in sand in Class One while these letters were memorized. Pupils in Class Two would write syllables of two letters in the sand while these syllables were studied.

There were twelve levels of instruction in arithmetic according to the monitorial system of instruction. After mastering one level, the pupil would be promoted to the next higher level. In Class One, pupils would learn to add units and tens while in Class Two pupils would master addition of numbers; in Class Three pupils would study compound addition. Pupils in Class Four mastered subtraction, while in Class Five they would study compound subtraction. Class Six would study multiplication, while in Class Seven compound multiplication would be mastered. Pupils in Class Eight studied division, while in Class Nine pupils would study compound division.

The Lancastrian monitorial system taught four curriculum areas--reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic. Memorization of learnings in these subject areas by pupils was the method of teaching emphasized.

Influence on American Education

The Lancastrian monitorial system did much to foster the common school idea in the United States. Prior to the introduction of this sytem in the United States, pupils had been taught individually or in very small groups. Pupils' progress had been slow and expensive due to teaching each child individually; a child would waste much time in waiting for his turn to recite. Under the Lancastrian system of instruction, the master teacher and the monitors attempted to keep pupils busy all of the time.

Instructional costs were kept at a minimum in the Lancastrian schools. Monitors taught pupils from charts located at various places in the schoolroom, thus reducing the need for textbooks. Children could write on their slates or on sandtables rather than using paper, pen, and ink. Since one master teacher could instruct monitors who in turn could teach from 200 to 1,000 pupils--each monitor being responsible usually for ten pupils--the costs of education were thus further reduced. Since children learned more

rapidly and educational costs were much lower under the Lancastrian system of instruction than under previous methods of instruction, the idea of free, public schools in the United States was brought closer to realization.

The Lancastrian monitorial system made it necessary that master teachers were efficient, capable organizers of instruction; these master teachers tended to make teaching a career. Monitors were trained in a school in Philadelphia as early as 1818; this school later became the city normal school of 1848. The training schools for monitors became the forerunners of normal schools in the United States.

Conclusions

The Lancastrian monitorial system of instruction would be rigid and formal to American educators today. However, it had much to offer in improvements over previous methods of instruction. Costs of educating pupils were greatly reduced through the use of monitors, teaching charts, and sandtables which helped to focus attention on the part of the public that children could be educated at a reasonable cost and at the same time master subject matter faster than had been thought possible previous to the introduction of the Lancastrian system. Children could be taught in groups rather than individually, and they could be promoted after mastery of subject matter to higher levels of instruction regardless of the achievement of other members in the group. Memorization of subject matter was advocated and emphasized. The entire school under the Lancastrian system of instruction was thoroughly organized for efficiency. With as many as 1,000 pupils being taught in one schoolroom and with pupils receiving much instruction from charts hung on the walls, it was necessary for each group of ten pupils to take their turn in front of the appropriate chart at the appropriate time. Each pupil knew where to put his personal belongings since space was precious with so many pupils in a classroom. Since there was a definite, specific way of organizing the Lancastrian school for instruction, schools for training monitors were organized and this lead in the direction of developing normal schools

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